

## A Roller-Coaster of Intelligences

A review of the film



### **The Social Network**

(2010)

David Fincher (Director)

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Reviewed by

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*The Social Network* is a film that chronicles the real-life story of Mark Zuckerberg, the cofounder of Facebook and, consequently, the youngest active billionaire in American society. The film is structured as a series of flashbacks in the service of unraveling the hornet's nest of litigation triggered by Facebook's inception. Although lawyers may find the tremendous length (years) and stakes (billions of dollars) of the legal proceedings edge-of-your-seat exciting, the filmmakers fortunately realized that few others feel as compelled to answer the question, Who most deserves to be deemed the official founder of Facebook? We know who founded Facebook: Mark Zuckerberg. We know this because he was the smartest person in the room, by far, and only the smartest person in the room could have done what he did. This is what the filmmakers zero in on—Mark's intelligence.

In particular, there are two story lines of intelligence that snake through the film's exciting and unique plot. There is Mark's genius-level cognitive intelligence, which prompts

his rise to riches and intellectual glory, and there is his equally profound social-emotional fall, driven by his significantly impaired social intelligence. As such, the story of Mark Zuckerberg is the story of two people: a legendary entrepreneur who uncovers the next virtual frontier and an alienated enigma who is sued for \$600,000,000 by his one and only friend.

## The Smart Mark

Indeed, when we think of the word *genius*, Mark is exactly the type of person who comes to mind, as his mental facilities hum away with the smooth sophistication of a cutting-edge computer. Observe him closely. In the film's opening sequence, we see his mind moving faster than anyone else's. He's on a date with his soon-to-be-ex-girlfriend, Erica Albright. They are at a bar, and Erica is struggling to keep up with his conversational shifts as he comments on history, literature, morality, and social class structure at a dizzying pace. He specifies his points, has fun with his references, and doubles back to his original claims with eloquence and bravado. Thus, we are introduced not just to a dorky, slightly framed individual but to his seemingly bottomless fund of knowledge, his sizzling vocabulary, and, more generally, his downright sexy verbal intelligence.

Back at his dorm later that night, Mark feverishly writes code for a website called Facemash that rates the "hotness" of Harvard women. Here, his cognitive abilities unfold with continued impressiveness as he connects the dots between general laws of computer science and the uppermost capabilities of various software systems, all while creatively side-stepping the various virtual obstacles in his path (i.e., online campus security networks). Further, he initiates elaborate technical commands while blogging about his intentions and motives. Indeed, his capacity to focus on and attend to information seems tireless, and his proficiency in simultaneously processing different types of information is boundless.

Thus, within the film's first 15 minutes, a picture of superior intellectual functioning emerges that spans every domain tapped by cognitive assessment. The most popular and well-validated IQ test, the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scales (Lichtenberger & Kaufman, 2009), measures processing speed, working memory, verbal comprehension, and perceptual reasoning, all of which underlie the aforementioned tasks that Mark seamlessly zips through. These components of intelligence came out of such psychological theories as the Cattell–Horn–Carroll theory of cognitive abilities, which dissects intellectual functioning into three categories of narrow, broad, and universal abilities (McGrew, 2005). Mark's ability to recall computer theory represents a narrow ability, for instance, whereas his skill at communicating knowledge to others (through blogging) represents intelligence on a broader level.

As the film unfolds, Mark's ample cognitive resources predictably carry him through an escalation of achievements as he moves from Harvard undergraduate/creator of Facemash to big-time businessman/creator of Facebook.

## The Stupid Mark

But this is only half the story, as Mark's meteoric rise proves quite bumpy. Time and again, Mark suffers emotional setbacks and interpersonal conflicts that affect his progress, health, and happiness due to a rather prominent theme of social stupidity. First coined by the psychologist-turned-journalist Daniel Goleman, the term *social intelligence* marks the capacity to identify, assess, and control the emotions of self, others, and groups (Goleman, 2006). If traditional cognitive-related IQ measured the ability to play well with information, then social IQ represents the ability to play well with people.

Let's observe the film's first 15 minutes through a slightly different angle. He's on a date. He's getting increasingly obsessive about the notion of status and increasingly upset about Harvard's social landscape of exclusivity. He fails to notice that Erica's getting increasingly upset with him and, after he incites their breakup (in record time), he copes rather poorly by getting drunk and creating a masochistic website. Then he gets upset with the school for getting upset with him.

This chain of events is driven by a failure to successfully navigate through certain elements of his internal and external worlds. Understanding and resolving his reactions to and conflicts with others are problems that remain head-scratching to him. In the few months of Mark's life that elapse between the inception of Facemash and Facebook, he manages to betray his best friend, Eduardo; incite the wrath of two relatively well-intentioned scholarly athletes; and get called an asshole by everyone around him, including his own lawyers. Again, these things happen because Mark presents with the kind of uncommunicative, arrogant, and awkward demeanor associated with low social intelligence.

Predictably, most people with low social IQs remain poorly understood by themselves and, by extension, by those around them. The film fails to overcome this hurdle as the audience is left with an unclear picture of Mark's relational intentions and preferences. In the end, Mark is rich but alone. We know how he got rich, but we never learn why he is alone or whether he even cares.

Beyond such limited character development (not necessarily the film's fault), *The Social Network* is an exceedingly high-quality and entertaining film. Aaron Sorkin has penned a witty and taunt script, and David Fincher moves the film along at a crisp, confident pace. Although the cast lacks the star power of those behind the camera, Jesse Eisenberg polishes Mark's rough edges enough to make the unabashed genius likable, and Justin Timberlake imbues Sean Parker, the legendary Napster founder, with a sneaky charm.

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## References

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